

## NIEHS brings public health perspective to climate change policy forum

By Pamela Kidron

NIEHS Senior Advisor for Public Health John Balbus, M.D., participated in the prestigious [Politics of Climate Change Forum](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/113426/politics-climate-change-forum) (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/113426/politics-climate-change-forum>) June 19 in Washington, D.C., co-sponsored by The New Republic magazine and the American University School of Public Affairs (AUSPA) Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

Balbus joined other key experts and observers of the climate change issue, such as Deputy Assistant to the President for Energy and Climate Change Heather Zichal, The New Republic Publisher and Editor-in-Chief Chris Hughes, and AUSPA Dean Barbara Romzek, Ph.D.

Balbus explained the impact of climate change on public health, stressed the importance of better communicating climate change-related health issues to the public, and pressed for more attention to the anticipated long-term health effects of climate change.

### How climate change impacts health

In the panel discussion “Rethinking Our Response to Climate Change: Policy Advice from Beyond the Beltway,” Balbus explained how changes in temperature can affect pollen numbers, how differences in water temperature and air temperature can affect the transmission of waterborne and fruitborne diseases, and how extreme events can influence mental health. Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, for example, have been associated with post-traumatic stress disorders. Some effects are not as well-studied as others, he added.

### Linked Video

[Watch as the panelists discuss the response to climate change, which begins at the 20-minute point in the video \(02:05:59\).](#)

Balbus said that despite a large body of knowledge firmly establishing that climate change threatens public health, the implications of that threat have yet to be embraced by the public.

“For years, the discourse on climate change has led people to think that climate change is a problem somewhere else, like the arctic, for something else, like a polar bear, or in a country that you will never go to in your life,” said Balbus.

Some communication researchers now favor personalizing and localizing the effects of climate change, continued Balbus, by showing, for example, how air pollution may affect the health of children with asthma, or how heat stress induced by elevated temperatures could impact grandparents with heart disease. He also pointed to a body of research that shows threats and negative impacts fail to mobilize people. Recent, preliminary research is looking at positive health messages, including what good can come from actually taking action on climate



The panel included, from left, moderator Jonathan Cone, senior editor of *The New Republic*; [Dan Lashof, Ph.D.](http://www.nrdc.org/about/staff/daniel-lashof), (<http://www.nrdc.org/about/staff/daniel-lashof>) director of the climate and clear air program at the Natural Resources Defense Council; Balbus; and [Anne Kelly](http://www.ceres.org/about-us/who-we-are/ceres-staff/anne-kelly), (<http://www.ceres.org/about-us/who-we-are/ceres-staff/anne-kelly>) director of public policy at Ceres. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Parks)



Balbus pondered his response to Cone's question about public perception of climate change issues. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Parks)

change.

## Long-term impacts

Balbus advocated for addressing not only short-term, but also long-term changes. There is much that can be done, such as reducing air pollution in the short-term to protect the public from some of climate change's milder impacts, he said. But addressing the root causes of air pollution is the type of long-term change that can be transformative.

“What gives public health officials pause to think are the possible long-term effects decades from now, such as the inability to feed a population of nine billion or the problem of living in coastal areas where there is massive sea level rising,” said Balbus.

## Public awareness

Responding to a question about why it is taking so long for the public to widely acknowledge that climate change threatens health, Balbus said the subject has yet to significantly enter such public discourse as media coverage, and it takes a long time from the point when the science on a subject is strong enough, to the point the general public accepts it as established fact and acts on it. “We are just not there yet,” he said.

(Pamela Kidron is a contract writer with the NIEHS office in Bethesda, Md.)



*The panelists were remarkably poised, especially considering the brilliant stage lighting on the set. (Photo courtesy of Christopher Parks)*

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